GNOSTIC ORIGINS AND THE BASILIDIANS OF IRENAEUS

BY

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The hypothesis concerning the origins of gnosticism which the author advanced in his lectures on the history of religions for the American Council of Learned Societies [1] consisted essentially of two parts. In the first place, he accepted, and endeavored to provide additional support for, the theory propounded by (*inter alios*) A. D. Nock, G. Quispel, G. Scholem, and R. McL. Wilson, that an essential element in gnosticism was provided in and by heterodox Judaism. In the second place, he tried to define this heterodox Judaism more precisely by emphasizing the rôle of Jewish apocalyptic literature in the rise of gnosis, and he then went on to argue that gnosticism, or at least many kinds of gnosis, arose out of the débris of shattered apocalyptic hopes. When apocalyptic prophecy failed, its devotees no longer looked for fulfilment on earth but sought to find escape for their "essential selves" in the aeons above. The author attempted to confirm this hypothesis by means of cumulative proofs, none of which, taken by itself, was absolutely convincing.

As he investigated various gnostic systems, he discussed that of Basilides as reported by Hippolytus (*Ref.* 7, 20-27) and neglected the account given by Irenaeus (*Adv. haer.* 1, 24). The reasons for preferring Hippolytus' description to that of Irenaeus have been set forth in some detail by F. J. A. Hort, P. Hendrix, and J. H. Waszink.[2] What Hippolytus tells us is almost certainly more accurate than what is reported by other anti-gnostic writers. But we are still left with the problem of explaining what the system is which

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[1] *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (to be published by the Columbia University Press, New York).

[2] Hort in *Dictionary of Christian Biography* I (1877), 268-81; Hendrix, *De Alexandrijnsche Hæresiarch Basilides* (Amsterdam, 1926); Waszink in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* I (1950), 1217-25.

we find in Irenaeus, in Pseudo-Tertullian (*Adv. omn. haer.* 4), in Epiphanius (*Panarion*, haer. 24), and in Philaster (*Haer.* 32). Hort's solution seems essentially correct: the "high-pitched philosophical speculation" of the original Basilidian system was too abstruse for his successors, and they therefore introduced something essentially different into their teaching; the doctrine reported by Irenaeus is "doubtless in substance the creed of Basilidians not half a century after Basilides had written." [3] Changes of this kind are not unknown in other gnostic groups; we may compare the earlier Marcionite doctrines with the myth, presumably derived from the *Baruch-book* of the gnostic Justin, which was being circulated among the Marcionites known to Eznik.[4] The only question we should raise concerns the time-span which Hort mentions. (1) He speaks of "not half a century." Perhaps "not" should be given more stress than "half a century," for it remains at least possible that Irenaeus' description goes back to the time of the apologist Justin. (2) If the Basilidians introduced a kind of "garden-variety gnosis" into their teaching, this gnosis must have been older than the time when they introduced it, though of course we are unable to say how much older it was.

For our purpose we are not concerned with the system of emanations which resulted in the production of 365 heavens.[5] We are concerned only with the relation between the celestial and the terrestrial which we find in Irenaeus' description. For we read that the God of the Jews, who was more "petulant and wilful" than the other angels, desired to secure empire for his people but provoked the rebellion of the other angels and their peoples. The result was that discord prevailed among men and among angels, and the Jews were perishing. It is hard to see how this picture can be related to anything but the failure of Jewish apocalyptic hopes and to the tragic events of the first and second centuries of our era (events leading up to the destruction of the temple in A. D. 70; rebellion under Bar

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[3] Hort, *op. cit.*, 279-80.

[4] Cf. C. S. C. Williams, "Eznik's Résumé of Marcionite Doctrine," *Journal of Theological Studies* 45 (1944), 65-73; gnostic Justin in Hippolytus, *Ref.* 5, 26.

[5] It may be, however, that the 365 (obviously related to the solar year) marks a conscious rejection of the 364-day year of the apocalyptic calendar provided in 1 Enoch and Jubilees and probably observed at Qumran.

Kochba in 132-135). The failure of apocalyptic predictions, and of prophecy interpreted as apocalyptic prediction, would explain why the Basilidians, like other early gnostics, regarded the Old Testament prophecies as inspired by angels, not by the supreme Father.

At the same time, the Basilidians must have believed that within the prophecies some gnosis lay hidden, for they taught that the secret name in which the Savior descended and ascended was Caulacau; and this is a Hebrew expression which may mean "line upon line" (or may be simply nonsense, the imitation of ecstatic speech by hostile witnesses) and comes from an enigmatic passage in Isaiah (28, 9-13). Verses 11 and 12 are applied to ecstatic speech by the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 14, 21). What the Basilidians had in mind may perhaps be indicated by the verses in Isaiah, which speak of the people's refusal to hear a straightforward prophecy about "rest." After the people refused to hear, God spoke to them only in gnostic revelation, such as that provided by the word Caulacau, unintelligible to outsiders.[6]

Since the Basilidians had abandoned the idea of fulfilment within history, they had to hold, with other early gnostics, that the Savior did not really become incarnate, and they advanced an ingenious explanation for the story of his crucifixion. He exchanged places with Simon of Cyrene (a notion which, as the Archbishop of Quebec has observed, could be grounded on a severely literal reading of Mark 15, 21-24) and stood by, laughing at those who thought they were crucifying him. Why was he laughing? The answer seems to be provided by the words of a Psalm which we know was interpreted messianically by early Christians. Psalm 2 begins with a picture of the "archons" (LXX) conspiring "against the Lord and his Anointed,"

[6] Kaulakau, Saulasau, and Zeesar (all from Isaiah) in the Naassene system (Hippolytus, *Ref.* 5, 8, 4) have certainly become *nomina barbara* (cf. W. Bousset, *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis*, Göttingen, 1907, 240), but it is at least possible that the Basilidians retained some knowledge of the Hebrew Isaiah. With their notion we may compare (on a much higher level) the words of John 12, 41: "Isaiah . . . beheld his glory, and he spoke of him" (cf. H. Odeberg, *The Fourth Gospel*, Uppsala, 1929, 306-8; R. Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, Göttingen, 1941, 346 n. 6). For the Basilidians too, Isaiah may have seen the Savior's glory and may have spoken of him in a way comprehensible only to them (note that in the Ascension of *Isaiah*, as in this system, Christ assumes the form of various angels as he descends).

and it goes on to say that "he who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord has them in derision" (verse 4). Here is, or may well be, the source of the notion that the Savior derided his enemies. Now the Psalm goes on to say that the Lord will terrify them and will say, "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill." But of this eschatological notion, or notion which could be interpreted eschatologically, there is no mention in the Basilidian system, unless it could be that the Savior's "standing by" reflects it—and if it does so, then apocalyptic eschatology has developed into gnosis.

Because the Savior did not really suffer, it was possible for the Basilidians to argue that public acknowledgement of the Crucified was not only unnecessary but positively wrong; it meant acknowledgement of Simon of Cyrene and of the angels who made the world, not of the Savior. It was to give the holy to dogs and to cast pearls before swine (Matt. 7, 6); and the Basilidian exegesis of this saying was that "we are the men, and the others are swine and dogs." Martyrdom—the kind of martyrdom characteristic of apocalyptic Judaism and Christianity [7]—was irrelevant and useless, as was the observance of dietary laws whether Jewish or Jewish Christian.

Our interpretation of this kind of gnosis as arising from, and out of, apocalyptic Judaism seems to be confirmed by a passage in which the Basilidians stated that they were "no longer Jews, but not yet Christians." The expression "not yet Christians" (*nondum*, Latin Irenaeus; *μηδέπω*, Epiphanius) is certainly obscure, as Hort observed; conceivably we could compare it with the idea of Ignatius that he was "not yet a disciple" (*Eph.* 3, 1; *Trall.* 5, 2; cf. *Rom.* 3, 2; 4, 2; 5, 3) or even not yet a man (*Rom.* 6, 2).[8] On the other hand, since the Basilidians certainly believed they were men, indeed the only true men, it is hard to see how they could think that they were not yet Christians. Perhaps Hort was right in thinking that they regarded themselves as "more than Christians." In any event, the words "no longer Jews" are clear enough. The Jews were perishing in the con-

[7] On this subject cf. W. H. C. Frend, "The Persecutions: Some Links between Judaism and the Early Church," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 9 (1958), 141-58.

[8] Cf. the emendation proposed by K. Holl (on Epiphanius, *Pan.* haer. 24, 5, 5) for Clement, *Strom.* 4, 81, 2 (from Basilides): *Χριστιανοὶ ‹οὔπω γεγονότες, ἀλλὰ μόνον εἰς τοῦτο› πεφυκότες.*

flicts among nations and their angels; the Basilidians were no longer Jews. It is most unlikely that they would have made any such statement had there been no historical ground for it.

The conclusion we should draw from this account of Basilidian doctrine, then, is that it confirms the hypothesis that at least some of the early gnostic systems arose when Jewish apocalyptic expectations were broken, and that these systems were propagated by Jews who had abandoned their religion.

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